

MONKS ON MOUNT ATHOS (THE HOLY MOUNTAIN) PERSECUTED!

by

Fr. Dr. Photios+ (W)

Thank you Lord for preparing our way to you by enabling us to live in America. In our country, constitutional, other legal principles, and common decency among Americans usually form a buffer against such persecutions as have been and are continuing to be perpetrated upon the monks of the Esphigmenou Monastery on Mount Athos.

An internet headline outlines the monks' plight:

“Remote Greek monks resist eviction”.¹ The monks are in the process of being forcibly evicted from their community. It is the “largest-ever known eviction of monks from Mount Athos since the community was founded more than 1,000 years ago”, the last eviction for the same reasons being a decade ago involved only five monks living in an isolated hermitage.² This eviction would impact more than a hundred Orthodox monks. The authorities cut off power and water, halted food and medicine supplies and set a deadline for forcible eviction. The persecution continues unabated as this homily is spoken.

The crux of the matter is the monks' opposition to the ecumenical activities of the ecumenical patriarchate of Constantinople (Istanbul). It seems the monks have had the audacity to stand up for the Orthodox Faith as delivered through the Apostles, the holy Fathers of the Church and the First Seven Ecumenical Councils- these Councils' confirmations of the Faith of the Fathers are the final arbiters of the faith.

The Esphigmenou monks have objected over decades to the ecumenical patriarchate's cosiness with the Roman Catholic church (lowercase on church is used to indicate that the Roman see is not the Church of the Orthodox Fathers). The impetus toward 'dialogue' between the patriarchate and Rome has accelerated since the current patriarch was elected in 1991.

Neither time nor space allows us to deal with the unorthodox activities participated in by the ecumenical patriarchate and his legions of cohorts representing what is loosely called “world orthodoxy”. The lowercase is used (orthodoxy) to differentiate between those espousing and following activities not supported by the Fathers and First Seven Ecumenical Councils and the One Holy Catholic & Apostolic Church (True Orthodoxy).

It seems the monks of Esphigmenou have referred to the Roman pope as a heretic. So? True Orthodoxy supports such a label.

It appears the patriarch is relying on his ability to brand the monks as “schismatics”. This, indeed, takes nerve. The Fathers of the Orthodox Church would view it otherwise. It is, in fact, world orthodoxy itself that is in schism. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has adopted an imitation of papalism, teaching a doctrine of subordination, that one cannot be a canonical Orthodox Christian if he is not in communion with - guess who- the Ecumenical Patriarchate. There is no canonical support for such a view. There are no Scriptural passages, no holy Canons, no Saints of the Orthodox Christian Church that have ever taught such a doctrine:

...Constantinople... has in recent times begun to teach that one cannot be a canonical orthodox Christian if he is not in communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Since not one holy canon or Saint of the Church has ever taught such a doctrine, the pronouncement of this teaching by the mentors of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is evidence of how far their own ‘Orthodoxy’ has departed from the ‘spirit’ and ‘truth’ of Christ. In view of the fact that their disdain of the holy canons is totally unabashed, their advancement of this doctrine is certainly most incongruous.³

The Rudder (Pedalion) stands second only to the Old and New Testaments in written authority: The holy Nicodemus comments on the efficacy of The Rudder:

This Handbook, in effect, is next after the Holy Scriptures a holy Scripture, and next after the Old and New Testaments a Testament..

This book, it may be said, is replete with the everlasting *bounds* (emphasis supplied) set by our fathers, and the laws which endure forever and which are above all the external and imperial laws of the Digests, of the Institutes, of the Codes, and of the Novels for the latter were issued by mere emperors, whereas the former were laid down by Councils, ecumenical and regional, through the Holy Spirit, and emperors ratified them. This book is truly, as we have entitled it, the Rudder of the catholic Church, which when thereby steered, conveys the sailors and passengers in it, those in holy orders, I mean, as well as laymen, safely to the unruffled haven of the kingdom above.⁴

Nowhere in The Rudder can be found support for the ecumenical activities of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Since this book comprises the everlasting bounds set by the Orthodox Fathers, it follows that those not within it are outside the Orthodox Faith. Abbot Methodius and his Esphigmenou monks are within these bounds. They are not schismatics: In “walling themselves off” from nonorthodox bishops even before any conciliar or synodical verdict has been rendered, they are not subject to any canonical penalty; in fact,

... they shall be deemed worthy to enjoy the honour which befits them among Orthodox Christians. For they have defied, *not bishops, but pseudo-bishops and pseudo-teachers*; and they have not sundered the union of the Church with any schism, but, *on the contrary, have*

been sedulous to rescue the Church from schisms and divisions
(emphases supplied).⁵

The majority does not rule in the faith, being small doesn't matter⁶, being truly Orthodox does. Having control of the premises is irrelevant to the Faith, those who have the Faith have the Apostolic faith, those occupying the Church premises by violence are outside the Church:

Thus, the more violently they try to occupy the places of worship, the more they separate themselves from the Church. They claim that they represent the Church but in reality they are the ones who are expelling themselves from it and going astray. Even if Christians faithful to tradition *are reduced to a handful, they are the ones who are the true Church of Jesus Christ.*⁷ (emphasis supplied)

Locality/territory is not the criterion of the Orthodox Faith, "... the church is not bound up with any locality... but she calls herself One Holy Catholic and Apostolic, knowing that the world belongs to her, and that no locality therein possesses any special significance..."⁸, and True Christians do not defer to the secular marketplace:

Thus, as briefly as possible I have set forth for you our love of wisdom, which is dogmatical and not dialectical, in the manner of the fishermen and not of Aristotle, spiritually and not cleverly woven, *according to the rules of the Church and **not** of the marketplace* (emphasis supplied).⁹

Fr. Pomazansky comments that "The sanctity of the Church is irreconcilable with false teachings and heresies. Therefore the Church strictly guards the purity of the truth and herself excludes heretics from her midst."¹⁰

The barometer of Orthodox unity is abiding by the "correct and saving confession of the faith" found in the dogmas and canons of the Church as expressed through the writings and witness of the Fathers of the Church as confirmed by the First Seven Ecumenical Councils. It is as St. Vincent of Lerins (+450) stated: "that which is believed always, that which is believed by everyone, and that which is believed throughout the whole world".

It is clear. The monks of Esphigmenou are not the schismatics. They are entitled to resist heresy.

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ CNN.com/World, January 17, 2003- see at <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/europe/01/17/greece.holywar.ap/index.html>.

² *ibid.*, p.2.

³ +Ephraim, Bishop of Boston, *Bishop Ephraim's First Encyclical to the Flock*, p. 3, <http://www.thehtm.org/homeland.htm>.

⁴ *The Rudder*, p. Li.

⁵ Canon XV of 1st & 2nd Council.

⁶ see St. Gregory the Theologian (of Naziansius +390) in his Homily , *Against the Arians*, quoted in the late Fr. Michael Pomazansky's landmark *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, pp.236-237.

⁷ St. Athanasius the Great (+373), the Champion of Orthodoxy against the Arian heresy in the First Ecumenical Council, letter to the fourth century true Orthodox, from Coll. Seleota SS. Eccl. Patrum Callu and Guillou, Vol. 32, pp. 411-412.

⁸ Alexei Stepanovitch Khomiakov (1860+), *The Church is One*, 1844/45, first published in 1863.

⁹ St. Gregory the Theologian (of Nazianzus) in his Homily 22 on the *Holy Trinity*, quoted by Pomazansky. op. cit., p.44.

¹⁰ id., p.239.